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ABSTRACT

The Council of Chief State School Officers' position paper on disabled students beyond school distinguishes among three groups of students who require minimal, interim, or continuing support to make the transition to work or postsecondary education and independent living. Obstacles to a smooth transition are noted, as well as federal efforts to address student transition needs and examples of interagency agreements at the state level. Among twelve recommendations for state education agency (SEA) leadership are the following: Chief state school officers should take the lead in identifying as a major state priority the need for adequate transition services for disabled students who have completed secondary school. SEAs should consider establishing a full-time coordinator position or designating a unit to work with local school systems to plan and implement transition programs. SEAs should encourage coordination and analysis of state data bases required for special education, vocational education, and vocational rehabilitation management. SEAs should promote cooperation between education agencies and the private sector so that vocational education programs are responsive to labor market trends and employer skill demands. (JW)

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DISABLED STUDENTS BEYOND SCHOOL: A REVIEW OF THE ISSUES

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Table of Contents

The Nature of the Problem	Page	1
Obstacles to Smooth Transition From School to Work and Independent Living	Page	2
Education Efforts to Address Transition Needs of Disabled Students	Page	3
Recommendations for State Education Agency Leadership	Page	4
References	Page	9
Acknowledgements	Page	10

DISABLED STUDENTS BEYOND SCHOOL: A REVIEW OF THE ISSUES

The Nature of the Problem

An estimated 250,000 to 300,000 students leave special education each year (Will, 1984). Many of these students leave because they have reached the maximum age for special education services. An indeterminate number of other disabled students graduate every year from the regular high school curriculum.

Three broad groups of disabled persons make the school to work and postsecondary education transition:

1. Group one consists of those disabled students who can achieve transition to postsecondary education or employment with no special help beyond that available from existing public school services, including career guidance, counseling, and job search assistance.

2. Group two is comprised of students who can make the transition with interim "time limited" services such as vocational rehabilitation, postsecondary vocational education, and other occupational training and supportive services.

3. Group three consists of students who will need "supported employment" programs which combine work opportunities with ongoing independent living services (Will, 1984).

Schools play a crucial role in the success of later transition for all three groups of disabled students. Secondary special education together with vocational education and other school-based services should provide the essential foundation in skills, attitudes, personal relationships, and

often employer contacts (Will, 1984). Secondary school programs for the disabled have grown tremendously since passage of the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA). Many of today's students who have completed secondary school have more severe disabilities, and many have more functional skills than their recent predecessors.

But improved secondary schooling of disabled students has not been sufficient to prepare students fully for later independent living and employment, or to assure that employment-related services are available when they are needed. Too many students leave school and enter into the same adult services they would have gone into had no school program been provided. Additionally, many disabled persons are refused needed services due to limited program funding. At present, only a fraction of the people who are eligible for rehabilitative services are actually served.

What is needed is attention to the transition process itself and the development of postsecondary options for all disabled students (Bellamy, 1983). This can be accomplished through new collaborative relationships and activities between schools and adult service providers and systems. Attention must also be directed to the larger obstacle of limited funding which will lessen the impact of improved transition efforts.

Obstacles to Smooth Transition From School to Work and Independent Living

Problems exist for all three groups of disabled students, although they are more severe for students found in groups two and three than in group one.

Many disabled students could and should benefit from appropriate vocational education programs, but their enrollment in vocational education remains very low - now close to four percent at the secondary level, the highest proportion in history. Disabled students are even less likely to be served in four-year and community colleges, despite evidence that with small program modifications and supportive counseling many can benefit from such educational opportunities.

Service to disabled youth has declined in the federal employment training programs. For example, while in 1981 approximately ten percent of the Comnprehensive Employment and Training Act program participants were disabled, the replacement Job Training Partnership Act places a lower priority on services to disabled youth (Senate Committee Report, 1983).

Some disabled students will need ongoing supportive services in order to work. Individuals in need of such "supported employment" services have severe mental and/or physical disabilities which usually render them ineligible for vocational rehabilitation. Transition programs from school to adult environments that combine employment opportunities with a variety of on-site support services are not well developed in most places.

Several problems must be overcome. No single federal agency is responsible for disabled adults. The major federal Health Care Financing Administration funding programs encourage day programs without vocational components and discourage supported employment. States differ widely in how they provide and manage services for disabled adults. Within states, frequently several programs relate to disabled youth and adults, and too often individual program officials lack sufficient knowledge about other programs' eligibility requirements and services. Often students in special education programs do not receive needed state vocational rehabilitation services due to different state priorities and inadequate funding levels. Finally, aside from targeted Job Tax Credits in the Social Security Law, there are not enough incentives for employers to provide jobs for the disabled when such jobs may require special equipment, longer training, extra supervision, and other services.

Education Efforts to Address Transition Needs of Disabled Students

Recently, the federal government and many states have initiated efforts to smooth transition for the disabled from secondary school programs to adult environments. The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) has adopted a transition program whose goal is sustained employment of all disabled students regardless of the nature or severity

of a disability. In 1983 Congress passed the Secondary Education and Transitional Services For Handicapped Youth Program, the purpose of which is to assist disabled youth in the transition from secondary school to postsecondary environments of competitive or supported employment. Massachusetts has enacted the "Turning 22 Law," Chapter 688, "to establish a transitional process out of the education system into the human service system" (Chapter 688 Implementation Guidelines and Instructions, 1984, p.2).

State education agencies and local school systems alone cannot meet the transition needs of disabled youth. But education officials can provide crucial leadership and enter into cooperative programs with other state and local social service agencies and providers. There are several important examples of innovative education initiatives.

Nearly 40 states have adopted cooperative agreements among special education, vocational education, and vocational rehabilitation programs. While some are not vigorously implemented, others have been actively pursued and enhanced. Minnesota has established an Interagency Office on Transition Services in the Department of Education which convenes regular meetings of eight state programs, parent advocates, and a legal agency. Massachusetts has created a Bureau of Transitional Planning within its Office of Human Services to assure that all disabled students who leave school and need continuing support services will receive them from the appropriate agency. North Carolina has established a transition planning office to coordinate services at the state and local levels and an interagency council with representation from all human services agencies. The 1985 OSERS Annual Report describes other major cooperative ventures for transition services in Delaware, Oklahoma, North Dakota, and Washington.

Recommendations for State Education Agency Leadership

1. Chief state school officers should take the lead in identifying as a major state priority the need for adequate transition services for disabled students who have completed

secondary school and are ready to work or pursue postsecondary education.

2. Chief state school officers should encourage coordinated planning and implementation of school to work and adult living transition services for disabled students. They could do this by convening regular meetings on transition services with appropriate state agency directors, including the heads of special education, vocational education, adult education, postsecondary education, vocational rehabilitation, developmental disabilities, mental health, human services, welfare, and job training partnership programs, and any other special programs for disabled youth and adults.

3. State education agencies (SEAs) should consider establishing a full-time coordinator position or designating a unit to work with local school systems to plan and implement transition programs.

4. SEAs should explore the use of Developmental Disability Act funds for coordinated planning, and vocational education funds should be utilized to enhance components of the secondary school program which assists students with handicapping conditions to make the transition from school to work.

5. SEAs should increase cooperative programs - beyond just agreements - among secondary special education, vocational education special needs programs, and vocational rehabilitation programs. SEAs should encourage:

   o joint development of individualized education plans (IEPs) and individual written rehabilitation plans (IWRPS);

- o coordinated special education programs, secondary vocational education special needs programs, and vocational rehabilitation services;

- o increased cooperative vocational education programs for disabled students;

- o placement of vocational rehabilitation counselors in all high schools;

- o regular and systematic exchange of information about individual student programs and progress;

- o coordination and analysis of state data bases required for special education, vocational education, and vocational rehabilitation management with the involvement of the National Occupational Information Coordinating Committees and the State Occupational Information Coordinating Committees; and

- o clarification and encouragement of the use of vocational assessments for students with handicapping conditions. The provision of vocational assessments increases the abilitity to match occupational and vocational programs with student skills and interests. The appropriate use of vocational assessments assists in establishing individually planned occupational programs and serves as a basis for coordinating more in-depth vocational rehabilitation assessments.

6. SEAs should encourage local school systems systematically to help plan and track progress toward young adult goals and needed transition services for disabled youth. SEAs should encourage local education programs which, beginning in elementary schools, expose all children including those with disabilities to the world of work and its responsibilities. Occupational programs, implemented in the early intermediate grades, should establish a full-range of skills and knowledge

that have been identified as essential to all individuals in their personal, family, home, community, and work responsibilities. Occupational programs should be closely linked to academics and ensure that all persons have equal opportunity to participate. A strong occupational program is essential for students with handicapping conditions both in terms of skill development and career awareness.

7. SEAs should encourage schools to work closely with parents of disabled students not only in determining appropriate education programs for their children but also in developing realistic life goals and identifying necessary transition or continuing services for their children after they leave school.

8. SEAs should support development of preservice and/or inservice training for personnel working in multidisciplinary programs for disabled youth.

9. SEAs should review the results of their recent vocational education civil rights compliance monitoring and vocational program evaluations to identify specific problems in access to, availability of, and quality of vocational services to the in-school disabled population. Information should be analyzed and charted by student characteristics such as sex, race, and disabling condition. The new three-year State Plans for Vocational Education required by federal law can provide a vehicle for targeting federal resources to state priorities for program improvement.

10. SEAs should encourage the development of state and local education and business partnerships, in conjunction with appropriate adult service providers, to:

   o expose disabled students to the world of work and job possibilities;

- provide work-study opportunities for such students;

- educate business about capabilities of their disabled;

- encourage businesses to hire disabled students for competitive jobs and to create supported employment opportunities for disabled youth finished with their schooling; and

- promote cooperation between education agencies and the private sector so that vocational education programs are responsive to labor market trends and employer skill demands.

11. Transitional programs should address the needs of young people who have dropped out of school. Such programs may need to establish outreach components to encourage young people who have dropped out and are still eligible for educational programs to reenter the education system.

12. SEAs should encourage increased cooperative efforts among postsecondary programs, occupational education, and vocational rehabilitation programs. A wider range of transitional support services must be established to provide disabled students with greater access to postsecondary programs.

And finally, throughout all of the initiatives undertaken to serve disabled students as they move from school to postsecondary environments, constant attention must be paid to the particular programs affecting female and minority students as a result of lingering biases and stereotyping based on sex, race, and national origin.

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